



It's Time to Act

**Improving Access to Government Information
for People with Sensory Impairments
and Other Disabilities**

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A BC HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION REPORT





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MARY-WOO SIMS
CHIEF COMMISSIONER

June 2000

To: The Honourable Andrew Petter
Attorney General and
Minister Responsible for Human Rights

In the past 20 years, British Columbia has certainly seen many improvements in making programs and services more accessible to people with disabilities. Despite these advances, however, people with disabilities continue to face barriers in accessing government information. The Human Rights Commission hears about the problems and obstacles, both in our ongoing contact with people with disabilities and their advocates and through complaints filed with the Commission.

Having equal access to government information is essential to enable people with sensory impairments and other disabilities to participate in the economic, social, political and cultural life of British Columbia.

Section 6(1) of the Human Rights Code permits the Commission to conduct or engage research into matters relevant to the Code. Earlier this year, the Commission undertook to research the problems and difficulties that people with disabilities face in obtaining information from the government in a format that is accessible to them. We also examined the extent to which a sample of government ministries are meeting the communication needs of people with sensory impairments. The report, **It's Time to Act: Improving Access to Government Information and Services for People with Sensory Impairments and Other Disabilities**, is the result of this research.

The report concludes that the government has much work to do to make its information accessible to people with disabilities, and that its time to act now. The recommendations are listed on page 39. The Commission is hopeful that the government will take this opportunity to implement policies and practices that will better serve the communication needs of people with disabilities.

Sincerely,

Mary-Woo Sims
Chief Commissioner



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Report production

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This report, and all BC Human Rights Commission publications, are available upon request in alternative formats, including Braille, large print, audiotape and computer disk.



Executive Summary



1. Communications between government and its citizens are vital for a democracy to flourish. Providing information in a manner that the public can access and understand is crucial. This is of particular concern to people with sensory impairments and to those with invisible disabilities. The government must ensure that legislation, policies and programs are fully accessible and do not exclude people with sensory impairments or perpetuate inequitable outcomes.
2. People with sensory disabilities include those who are blind, print-handicapped, deaf-blind or hard of hearing or who have low vision. People with invisible disabilities include those with low literacy, dyslexia, dementia, fetal alcohol effects, cognitive impairments and brain injuries.
3. The BC Human Rights Commission had research conducted to determine how government provides information in alternate formats, with a primary focus on individuals with sensory impairments. One aspect of the research was to consult individuals, advocates and community groups regarding their experiences and insight into how the provincial government communicated with people who had sensory impairments. The other aspect was to develop a snapshot of the efforts of selected government ministries to provide information, programs and services in different formats to meet the needs of people with sensory impairments.
4. Community consultations revealed that stakeholders are of the view that the government has known about providing information in alternate formats for many years but has refused to act. There is no need for further study - the government should act now.
5. Community consultations also revealed that the failure to provide information in alternate formats affects families and individuals and has economic impacts. Information is difficult to obtain and many people have given up asking for it. Front line workers are overwhelmed and unaware of the issues around good communications. These workers are an important resource in the communication process with government. Front line and senior government officials must be appropriately trained in disability issues.



6. Most community stakeholders stated that they have no relationship with the Office for Disability Issues, the principle provincial government agency dealing with disability matters. Many were unaware of the work of this agency. The provincial government needs to enter into a dialogue with stakeholders, advocates and community groups who are prepared to form partnerships with the government to resolve communications issues.
7. Technology has created advances that provide more opportunities to communicate. However, many people lack sufficient income to access technology.
8. Demographic trends reveal that the total number of people with disabilities will substantially increase in the next 20 years. The government needs to put policy in place now to meet immediate and future needs and demands. The government also needs to address difficulties faced by rural and isolated residents.
9. Government ministries are aware of the need to provide information in alternative formats, but there is no government priority to do so. There are no policies directing the provision of information in alternate formats. Budgets of ministry communications offices are limited and diminishing. Offices are understaffed.
10. The Office for Disability Issues has done substantial work on developing policy on the provision of information in alternate formats. Amongst the government ministries examined, the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security (MSDES) is most attuned to the issues and would, if permitted, take a leadership role in providing information in alternative formats.
11. While ministries put out a great deal of information, very little is in alternate formats. Ministry websites require further upgrading to provide information in "text only" formatting. Of the ministries contacted, MSDES provided the most information in alternative formats.
12. To avoid discrimination, the government should take immediate steps to adopt and implement the Policy on the Provision of Alternate Formats and Alternative Communications Support prepared by the Office for Disability Issues.
13. Each ministry and Crown Corporation should be required to report yearly on progress made to implement this policy. A senior level committee of government representatives and community groups and advocates should be established to meet quarterly to review progress on the implementation. An



additional responsibility of this committee would be to make recommendations to the government on improvements to the policy.

14. In consultation with community groups and advocates, the government needs to develop provincial policy pertaining to people with invisible disabilities and for "Intervenors". Policy development pertaining to people with invisible disabilities should include the use of clear language, confidentiality and privacy issues, and the role and mandate of advocates.
15. The BC Human Rights Commission should undertake further research on challenges facing people with invisible disabilities in communicating with the government.
16. The provincial government should establish, as a performance measure for Deputy Ministers, the successful implementation of the government's policy on alternative communications.
17. Deputy Ministers, ministry and Crown Corporation directors of communication, and front line ministry staff serving the public should be required to undertake sensitivity training on disability issues. Such training programs should be adequately resourced. Training should be developed in partnership between community groups, advocates and the provincial government.
18. The provincial government should develop a policy on the provision of surplus computers to assist people with sensory impairments. In addition, the government should seek partnerships with the private sector to expand such a program.
19. All government publications available in an alternate format should be clearly tagged with a distinct logo. This would include distinct colour and texture and a consistent location on the publication. The government should also ensure there is closed captioning on all government television advertisements and, where 1-800 numbers are used, it be read aloud.
20. The government should establish a central body, like Enquiry BC, as a one-stop body of knowledge with expertise on issues that affect people with disabilities. This body would have a 1-800 number and would serve the needs of people in the community as well as be a resource for front line and other government staff.
21. The government should ensure the InfoSmart 2000 Website is made accessible to people with visual impairments. All government websites should adopt "text only" standards.





Introduction

Communications between government and its citizens are vital for a democracy to flourish. How government communicates what it does, and how it shares and exchanges the information it collects, the laws and regulations it establishes, and information about the programs and services it provides are important to the public. In particular, providing this information in a manner that the public can access and understand is crucial. The failure to do so for any group in society can disenfranchise and marginalize members of that group from mainstream society.

The issue of accessible information is of particular concern to people with sensory impairments¹, and to those with certain invisible disabilities. People with sensory impairments include those who are blind, print-handicapped, deaf-blind or hard of hearing, or have low vision. The failure to provide information that is accessible can be a significant barrier to enabling these people to participate fully and equally in society.

People with sensory impairments and invisible disabilities come from all aspects of community life and all sectors of society. They represent every income bracket, age group and region. Their ability to participate and be involved in society impacts, not only the individuals themselves, but also their families.

In the 1998/9 fiscal year, the highest percentage of complaints (20.3%) received by the BC Human Rights Commission (BCHRC) was related to physical disability. The BCHRC was very concerned about this trend and met with key community organizations representing people with disabilities to identify strategies to combat the discrimination being experienced by the disability community. One suggested strategy was a news conference to bring public attention to the prevalence of discrimination that people with disabilities face; another was community consultation on disability issues.

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Both events were held on September 22, 1999, sponsored by BCHRC in partnership with the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities, BC Association for Community Living, BC paraplegic Association and the BC Aboriginal Network on Disability Society.

Among other concerns, participants at the consultation raised the issue of alternative communication formats. Specifically, they identified the need for government to provide communication, including print materials in alternative formats. This report is part of the Commission's follow up to these concerns.

In February 2000, the BCHRC commissioned this research to determine how government provides information in alternate formats, with a primary focus on individuals with sensory impairments. In its strategic plan, the Commission has a specific goal to reduce barriers for people with disabilities by increasing the percentage of public services that are provided in alternative formats. The Commission also seeks to improve the level of satisfaction that service providers and people with disabilities have regarding accessible services. The research was undertaken to further the Commission's objective in this area.

This research project had two components. One was to consult individuals, advocates, and community groups regarding their experiences and insight into how the provincial government communicated with people who had sensory impairments. The research was to incorporate their views on how accessible government information is for people with sensory impairments so that they can participate in their communities in the most productive and complete manner possible.

Those consulted were also asked to provide advice on practical, immediate and longer range steps the government could take to improve gaps in its communications and operational approaches.

The second component of this research project included developing a snapshot of government efforts in four ministries to provide information, programs and services in different formats to meet the needs of people with sensory impairments. These ministries were: the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security; the Ministry of Finance and Corporate Relations²; the Ministry for Children and Families; and, the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks. Specifically, the objective of this part of the project was to:

- develop an inventory of the information, programs and services that each ministry provides, including an indication of the various formats in which they are provided;
- ascertain the experiences of the ministries in question in receiving and responding to requests for alternative communications;

If they don't want to spend money providing alternative communications, then they can spend it on human rights settlements!

Legal Advocate



- determine levels of awareness of the issues of concern to people with sensory impairments, and policies and procedures in this area;
- review what steps, if any, have been taken to make information, programs and services available in alternative communication formats;
- identify areas that are meeting the needs of people with sensory impairments which can serve as a model for other ministries;
- identify gaps in meeting such needs;
- identify barriers that must be overcome; and,
- make recommendations for government in general regarding the need for alternative communication formats that better serve all people.

During the course of this research, it became clear that problems obtaining information in an accessible format are not restricted to those with sight and hearing impairments. A number of individuals, advocates, community groups and government staff spoke of the need to include those with invisible disabilities when considering how government should be providing information.

Invisible disabilities include low literacy, dyslexia, dementia, and fetal alcohol effects. Those consulted spoke about how individuals with such disabilities face huge challenges communicating with government and that these problems are often compounded by lack of diagnosis or recognition.

They spoke about the need for different solutions from those that might be appropriate for people with impairments such as sight or sound loss. They also stated that this sector of the community is experiencing a large degree of difficulty in having its needs recognised by government.

The results of this research follow, commencing with the community consultations.

¹ Conflicting definitions were offered with respect to the terms "sensory impairments" and "disabilities". The terms used in this paper represent the language adopted by the majority of the people consulted.

² After the commencement of community consultations, the Ministry of Finance and Corporate Relations advised it would not be able to participate in this research project as it was in the middle of budget preparations. However, discussions with the community included comments about this ministry, and the ministry's publications and website were examined as part of this review.

1. Community Consultations

Introduction



A series of interviews were held with leading individuals, community groups and advocates in February and March 2000, predominantly in the Victoria/Vancouver area. Groups and individuals in rural areas of the province were also consulted, although in much smaller measure. Interviews were conducted in person, via e-mail, by telephone and through faxed correspondence.

In conducting the interviews, some people were quite willing to express their views publicly. Others expressed a fear of reprisal from the government if they expressed their opinions and feelings. In order to encourage a full and frank discussion of the issues and to share in the rich experiences of the community, consultations were undertaken in a private and confidential manner. Quotes which are featured throughout this report are broadly descriptive of the sector of the community in which the speaker participates.

Stakeholders who were initially contacted suggested additional people and groups they felt had expertise and information to share. They wanted to ensure that all appropriate participants were consulted. This included those who have experiences with invisible disabilities. Within the time available, this advice was accepted and consultations expanded.

Approximately 31 stakeholder groups participated in the research as well as individuals within agencies. Agencies and societies advised us they would be requesting feedback and further consultation within their own community structures and in group meetings.

Among those whose expertise was sought were people with hearing impairments, sight impairments, diabetes, depression, mental illness, low literacy, cerebral palsy, fetal alcohol effects, or AIDS/HIV, people with more than one disability or impairment, seniors, and lawyers, educators, and advocates involved in these matters. The consultation process included agencies that advocate for people with disabilities and agencies that deliver services to assist people with sensory impairments or other disabilities.

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The ability to successfully conduct and complete this research was slowed by the need to provide background information in an alternate format to community

stakeholder groups. Communities needed to receive information in alternative formats in order to participate fully. Notwithstanding this, individuals, advocates and community groups made generous efforts to share their time and expertise.

Community consultations uncovered a number of common themes, thoughts and opinions that are considered below. They include: the need for government to act now, the impact on families and individuals, how government communicates and how it interacts with the community, as well as the experiences with front line government workers.

Communities shared their information and experiences with the hope that there will be action to change and enhance the ability of government and communities to communicate. The researchers have tried to record the information and experiences in terms voiced by the stakeholders.

a) The Need for Government to Act Now

Stakeholders provided clear messages that government knows about the critical need to provide information in alternate formats. They stated that the government knows what the problems and issues are and that it just is not listening and is not acting on what it knows. Some stakeholders stated that recommendations have been made to the government since the early 1990's to adopt an equal access policy. This policy would provide, for example, that proceedings of government meetings and government documents would be in simple accessible formats for people with sensory disabilities. However, the government has refused to act.

Stakeholders told us that when court cases relating to the rights of people with disabilities have been won, the government has limited the application of the judgment as narrowly as possible. As a result, wider needs are not addressed. Some stakeholders stated they are considering class action suits in order to get action on unresolved issues.

The following additional points were raised:

- No more studies are required. Action is required. Government has a good understanding and recognition of the barriers affecting people with sensory impairments; it just doesn't act.

- The implementation of policy and action by government on the issues of sharing information with people who have sensory impairments and disabilities is long overdue.
- All citizens have the right to monitor government activities and initiatives, collect information on the effectiveness of government's business applications and to vote accordingly. Some citizens feel they have been discriminated against with regard to the perusal of this information.
- Government could benefit by working with communities to determine needs and to explore cost saving measures. Communities say they are used to doing more with less and they can share those measures.
- Community stakeholder groups and advocacy agencies have developed policies which could be adapted for use by government and they are willing to share their expertise.
- Engaging in interactive information sharing with people with sensory impairments and disabilities by providing clear information would cut down on staff time which goes to re-addressing issues due to lack of understanding or communication failures.
- The experience of some people with impairments and disabilities is that they can compete in the job force and in their communities in a very effective manner with some minor assistance and access to information.

b) Impact on Families and Individuals

Stakeholders were strongly united in the view that people with sensory impairments or disabilities are unable to participate in their families, in their communities, and in society in the same manner as others do. They cited the incredible amount of time it takes to access basic information. Even then it may not be available. The whole family is impacted. Family members who try to assist are exhausted. There is less quality time available for other individuals in the family or for the caregivers to look after their own needs.

The following additional points were raised:

- A disability is usually for life and therefore the communication and access to services should be seamless across ministries. This would help alleviate the stress of caregivers, the family, or friends and advocates who often spend hours communicating between several sections of government in order to engage a much-needed service.



- Caregivers are frustrated by the need to apply repeatedly for services for which the needs will never change. They are further frustrated by a constantly changing set of rules and programs which create more communications work.
- When caregivers get burned out, other supports and assistance must be put into place. Caregivers, advocates, and friends are a valuable resource.
- Individuals with both sight and hearing impairments live in a quiet dark world. To assist in participating in family and community, an "intervenor" is the only answer. An "intervenor" is the chosen term to represent the skills, commitment, teaching, advocacy, and respite that Helen Keller's "Teacher" provided to her and her family. The skills and knowledge of the intervenors provide a quality of life to the individual and provide assistance to exhausted families.

c) Economic Impacts

People with sensory impairments often need to rely on disability pensions and income assistance. Many have a lower standard of living, lower employment incomes, and higher unemployment rates than does the rest of society.

Stakeholders stated that most live below the poverty line. Some have lower levels of educational advancement. They are significantly under-represented in the labour force, education and training facilities.

People need to earn a living and be a part of the community. They want to be - and can be - productive members of society. Communications are vital to their economic independence. Today, more than ever, they require access to labour market and other information and to service providers that are sensitized to their needs.

The following additional points were raised:

- The economic benefit to government and assistance to front line government workers of the gifts of time and assistance by family caregivers, friends, and advocates should be acknowledged.
- Seniors are active in helping people with sensory impairments and invisible disabilities. They use their time, energy and skills to help. This saves ministries staffing and programming costs.



d) Invisible Disabilities

Invisible disabilities are those which affect a person's thinking and reasoning. They include fetal alcohol effects, brain injuries, mental illness or depression, and dementia. Community stakeholders stated that this group of individuals needs the services and support of front line government workers and advocates to communicate. These individuals are more likely to become "lost" in society without any support from other members of society or government because of their inability to decode information, to communicate effectively, and to enlist supports through the appropriate prescribed processes.

Front line workers are critical communication links to information for people with cognitive impairments. These workers need to be sensitive and knowledgeable in their ability to assess and address the issues of invisible disabilities in a pleasant, patient, and willing manner.

The following additional points were raised:

- People suffer a loss of privacy and independence trying to access information. This is true for those who need interpreters to access information and for those who need the services of front line staff. This is particularly true for individuals with AIDS/HIV.
- People who live with AIDS/HIV have issues with cycles of illness which affects both their physical and thought processes. Communication needs change as the illness changes its scope. Front line workers and systems need to be flexible to ensure that information shared is appropriate for both ministries and clients.
- Some individuals deny or are unaware of their invisible disability. Front line workers need to be sensitive to the possibility that the process needs to be slower or more discussion may be needed to complete formal processes such as forms for benefits or receiving information about caring for children.

Since people are not dying, sick, starving or homeless, our information needs are ignored.

Self Advocate



e) How People Saw Government Communicating

A number of strong messages were given by stakeholders that government does not recognize communication as a sharing of information and an interactive process. They stated that the government communicates passively and is extremely hard to engage in any discussion regarding the provision of information. Communications are not proactive or interactive. Government gives out information but there are few links to get more information.

Stakeholders see communications at ministry offices as difficult because they are understaffed and overworked. Information sharing within and outside of government was described as confusing and complex. A strong coordinating body of information sharing and direction would be an asset.

The lack of two-way communication ultimately has a negative impact on productivity and expense for both clients and ministries. Repeated requests, missed opportunities and lack of co-ordination create significant disadvantages.

The following additional points were raised:

- Government dissemination and formatting of information doesn't meet the needs of people with sensory disabilities.
- Stakeholders are affected by, but not included in, the development of policies and programs by government. Many well-meaning and well-intentioned government initiatives are not communicated to people who need them.
- The government knows that there are barriers which can be removed. It lacks the commitment to respond to the information needs of people with sensory impairments. People want barriers removed so they can have full access, integration and participation in society.
- The government has made few items into videos, Braille, large text and clear language that is vetted and written with people with disabilities. The government has not been proactive in providing these materials. It is very hard to move government to utilize its resources to provide strategic, common, necessary documentation in response to stakeholder requests.
- Communication issues are the same across ministries. There is a strong need for integration and continuity of services and information across ministry lines. One ministry will sometimes hold off on a benefit while the



client checks with another ministry to see if the benefit or device is offered through the next ministry.

- Ministries do not provide information to ethnic communities in alternative formats. Individuals from these communities become invisible.
- Government communication efforts reveal two standards, two classes of people. The government must ensure that legislation, policies and programs are fully accessible and do not exclude persons with sensory impairments or perpetuate inequitable outcomes.

f) How Information Was Obtained From Government

All those consulted spoke about the need to rely upon each other, not on the government, to share and obtain information. They told us the main source of information for people with sensory impairments and invisible disabilities, advocates, and families was "word of mouth". This meant that important information was sometimes missed or not received in a timely manner.

People with vision or hearing impairments often obtain information best through electronic means, e-mail or the web. Other methods of communication are with advocates, front line government workers, TTY and Braille. Government makes little, if any, effort to provide information which can be accessed by those with vision and hearing impairments

Where information can be accessed by technology for individuals with vision or hearing impairments, access is often theoretical. Those with impairments are often economically disadvantaged. Many cannot afford or access computers, let alone acquire adaptive technologies.

The "information age" is creating challenges and opportunities for all people. The lack of good communication is devastating to people with sensory impairments who have to depend on other means for their communication and information needs.



g) Communicating with Government

Community groups stated that they fare little better than individuals when it comes to interacting with government. They stated that community groups, with the exception of large agencies who are able to make collective threats via media and public exposure, are not able to get the government to react to communication requests.

Community groups and individuals tend to go to the immediate worker or ministry contact for information and communication. When this linkage breaks down, for whatever the reason, the client tends to give up. Concerns are unlikely to get to the supervisory or policy table level.

I asked myself, "What's wrong with me! Why can't I keep up? They suggested a counselor ... I finally realized ... It wasn't me!

Single Mom of Child with Dual Disabilities

with invisible disabilities, who don't have family or advocates, or live in rural or isolated areas, don't fare well in communicating with government.

Community agencies and individuals want to be consulted about changes to information and programs. Community groups stated that they want to contribute to the solution. They stated that the government has no partnerships with communities to resolve communications issues.

The following additional points were raised:

- Not everything needs to be transcribed into alternative formats and there are less expensive means and ways to accomplish the tasks. For example, e-mail is a method most people with vision problems and blindness asked as an alternative format. All documents do not have to be provided in Braille for the whole community of vision impaired people. Printing such documents on demand through small businesses set up to accommodate the small printing project would provide cost savings.
- Community groups have offered the government information on how to reduce transcribing costs.



h) Experiences With Front Line Government Workers

All consulted agreed that front line government workers are a critical communication link for people with sensory impairments and for many people with invisible disabilities, especially those with cognitive impairments, dyslexia, low literacy, dementia, fetal alcohol effects and brain injuries. These impediments make it very difficult to communicate with the most used tools of communication, such as information in print. For people with invisible disabilities, communication must be through a knowledgeable person who can give clear information and provide empathy and support.

All stakeholders spoke with concern about communications and obtaining information from front line workers. Front line workers are overwhelmed and unaware of the issues around good communication which facilitates the effective delivery of services to those with sensory impairments or disabilities. There is a lack of awareness of the reality of how people need to communicate. There is a lack of staff time to enable a productive and satisfactory conclusion for both parties dealing with communications issues.

The following additional points were raised:

- Rules and procedures need to be carefully explained to clients. Front line workers need to ensure clients understand or are helped through a process of follow up.
- Many front line workers use harsh language, and have a lack of awareness of, and disrespect for, client needs for clear, readily understandable communications.
- Programs and services are vast, overlap in areas across ministries, and are very complex. Front line workers are not able, and do not know where to access or provide the information that people with sensory impairments require. This is frustrating for them, as well, because they don't know where to turn for assistance or advice. A "body" of knowledge is needed, an inquiry point which has knowledge or can provide access to front line workers. Such a body needs expertise on issues of sensory impairments and the accesses needed for good information sharing and access to programs.



The language was harsh: "... either move to cheaper accommodation or share your place with someone else. If I do not hear from you I will assume you have either died from malnutrition or you have undisclosed income."

Government Employee

i) Training Issues

Stakeholders consulted identified front line government workers as one of the important resources in the communication process with government.

Stakeholders were virtually unanimous that ministry front line workers and senior staff and all agencies need to be trained for awareness and sensitivity. They require a knowledge of the best way to engage in communication and to be involved in information sharing with those who have sensory impairments or invisible disabilities. They need to experience what it is like to have a disability.

Stakeholders also reported that there is a need for ministries to know how to plan ahead, to know how to make cost effective solutions, to know how to establish support networks, and to make future plans for a client's needs in an integrated fashion with others as these are critical elements of cost savings and resource utilization.

Stakeholders stated that politicians and ministry staff at the higher levels of government need to know how the changes they put in place impact the clients they mean to serve. Changes in name, conditions of services, and communication in a passive format impede basic life activities for people with disabilities or sensory impairments. People don't hear about changes, or see role changes, until they experience them in a negative fashion or until they get them by "word of mouth". For example, a number of individuals didn't know what programs and services were delivered by the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security. Some believed there still was a program called "Welfare".

j) Accessing Information - Transportation

Seniors with mobility issues and clients in rural and isolated areas do not have access to transportation. Clients with impairments and disabilities have great difficulty getting to a ministry office where they may have to communicate their needs or share information that government needs to initiate appropriate services.

In rural and isolated areas, there is little assistance to help people. People with sensory impairments and invisible disabilities are very often economically disadvantaged or otherwise unable to access transportation in the same ways as most of the population does. The more "rural" the person is, the more inaccessible is information and communication.



k) Community Stakeholder Experience With ODI

Most community stakeholders stated they have no relationship with the Office for Disability Issues (ODI). The concern expressed was that the ODI could not be an effective advocate and an agency of the government. There is a perceived conflict of interest.

Community people saw confusion in the role and the mandate of the ODI. Communication and business plans from the ODI and its supporting ministry are not clearly communicated to its constituents.

The following additional points were raised:

- Many stakeholders stated their belief that the ODI reacts to politically active advocates but does not focus on the issues of those people who live with invisible disabilities.
- Other stakeholders stated that there is no link of communication between the ODI and themselves.
- Many stakeholders stated that they want a champion to take their issues forward to be addressed. They believed that their individual denials of rights were not addressed or advocated for by ODI. They further believed that they have no voice in policy through the ODI.

l) Experiences With Technology

Stakeholders stated that, for many people with sensory impairments, technology has created advances that provide more opportunities to communicate. Those with hearing impairments and visual impairments can, with minor adjustment, or with reasonable ease, communicate in a prolific and active manner. It has broadened their horizons to communicate in the community, family, volunteer sectors and employment.

Stakeholders stated that e-mail is a treasure. Web pages on the Internet, on the other hand, tend to be in a format which makes finding links to information very frustrating, if not impossible. This could be corrected and standardized with minor adjustments. Computers and the adaptations to them save money and enable people with sensory impairments to do "more with less". However, the reality is that most citizens who live with sensory impairments are economically disadvantaged and often cannot afford computers or internet/email services.



The following additional points were raised:

- Many stakeholders advised that the young with sensory impairments should be given the advantage of new technology whenever possible. The young will benefit the most, will be the most able to become a competitive member of the work force, and will help the aging population with the use of technology skills.
- Another section of technology, the new voice mail and telephone services have been both a blessing and a joy to seniors. Telephones are essential to doing business for seniors. Arthritis, as well as other mobility problems, makes phones an equalizer to communicate with government.
- Seniors identified spoken conversations as their best method of communicating. They sometimes find that, while the government's agenda, programs and services, and changes are clear to the government, they are not always clear to them. They need to ask questions to understand all the issues or requirements.
- Seniors often talk about "getting in" through government communications as if they were cracking a code. Voice mail is hated and feels very much like a denial of access to necessary communication.

m) Demographic Considerations

BC Statistics and demographics indicate that the total population of British Columbia will expand over the next 20 years. Demographic books such as Boom Bust and Echo (Foot and Stoffman, MacFarlane Walter & Ross, May 1996) indicate that Canadians are living in a society where the population is aging. Canadians who will be over 65 will double in the next 35 years to become 25% of the population. Adults with disabilities are living longer. Health care technology allows for longer lives, which means more supports in the later years. The number of children with fetal alcohol syndrome is increasing, as is HIV/AIDS, arthritis, diabetes, and Hepatitis C. In Asian and First Nations communities, diabetes is increasing rapidly.



Pharmaceutical companies and suppliers of medical supplies have already recognized the need to provide clear precise language in their communications. They are becoming more geared to servicing the needs of the baby boomers and seniors and in the use of clear language and videos in promotional/educational materials.

What the statistics show is that there will be more people with sensory impairments, which will further affect communication needs. What statistics don't tell is the percentage of invisible disabilities that are not included because they cannot be diagnosed, such as low literacy, dyslexia, clinical depression, and fetal alcohol effect. Many estimate this is a category which holds a substantial portion of the population. In addition, there are those with mental impairments due to brain injury, and mental health issues. One advocacy agency reveals its caseload is 60% due to people with cognitive impairments.

People with impairments who can be diagnosed through formal assessments are counted in statistics. They are reported to be about 18% of the population according to most information sources. This often does not include those who are seniors and those with invisible impairments.

Many consulted identified a significant need to take steps now to provide alternative communications in order to be prepared for the increase in people who will have some form of sensory impairment in the near future. They stated that the government must see that providing communications clearly, in several formats, and in consultation with community experts, is vital to the economic future of British Columbia.

*If we are too negative
in what we say,
government won't
listen even though
it's hard to find
something good to
say.*

Self Advocate

n) Summary of Community Consultations

Those consulted were clear that the government has, for many years, known about the critical need to provide information in alternate formats but has refused to act, even when requested to do so. Many people have given up asking for information in alternate formats.

Those consulted were clear that the failure of the government has had, and continues to have, a severe impact on families. They are often overwhelmed from the daily activities of living with individuals with sensory impairments and trying to access appropriate services and programs. They do not have the resources or the stamina to press for systemic changes. When the information is provided in an alternate format, it has not been provided in a timely manner, nor has the government acted proactively.

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Some stakeholders cited the failure of the government to follow the leadership of a province like Alberta which has workable provisions for providing information in alternate formats.



**It's Time
to Act**

Communications are vital for people with sensory impairments to have economic independence. The failure of the government to provide readily accessible information disenfranchises and marginalizes people from the economy and from mainstream society. It prevents them from being productive members of society.

The government also needs to pay particular attention to the communication needs of those with invisible disabilities, who are not recognized or acknowledged when communication policies are established.

Those consulted were strongly of the view that the government does not recognize communication as a sharing of information and an interactive process. Government dissemination of information fails to take into account the

information needs of people with sensory impairments. To remedy this, the government needs to enter into a dialogue with stakeholders, advocates and community groups.

**We tend to look at the floor because we know what it looks like.
To look up and see what we could be is just too intimidating.** Self Advocate

Information about government programs and services is obtained through friends,

community groups and advocates "by word of mouth". Community groups have sought to work with the government to address communication issues but have not had success.

Front line government workers are not meeting the information needs of the community. There is a lack of awareness of the issues. In addition, front line workers are overworked and have no access to a central database of government information to assist them. There is no one-stop body of knowledge of the issues both for the reference of staff and for the public. In addition, front line workers and senior government officials need sensitivity training on the communication needs of people with sensory impairments and invisible disabilities.

Communications difficulties experienced by rural and isolated residents, those with invisible disabilities, ethnic minority groups, seniors and Aboriginal cultures were criticised as being ignored by the government.

Technology changes offer possibilities for the community, but many stakeholders with sensory impairments are economically disadvantaged and cannot afford the required computers and other hardware. Therefore providing alternative



communication via Internet, for example, does not alone solve the problem for people who are deaf/blind, need intervenors, or who have cognitive impairments and need well-trained, sensitive front line staff.

Community stakeholders were displeased with the lack of commitment by the government to make information, programs and services available in alternative communications formats.





2. Government Recognition of Communication Needs

Introduction

A series of interviews were held in February and March 2000 with ministry officials designated by Deputy Ministers from the three participating ministries. In-person interviews were held with communications staff from each ministry and, in the case of the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security and the Ministry for Children and Families, with additional senior officials. The researchers consulted with ministry officials to determine the following information:

- the level of awareness about the importance of, and the need for, alternative communications for people with sensory impairments;
- their awareness of different alternative formats for people with different sensory impairments;
- their awareness of the need for government web sites to be fully accessible to people with different sensory impairments;
- the ministry's experiences with, and responses to, requests from people with disabilities for alternative communications;
- the ministry's experience with providing alternative communications to staff with sensory impairments;
- whether the ministry or its communication branch has any formal or informal policy on alternative formats and procedures for responding to requests; and,
- barriers faced by the ministry in developing alternative communications.

From ministry consultations, the researchers were to develop an inventory of the public communications materials and activities in each of the ministries consulted. Formats used for each item were to be identified, with a focus on identifying the various formats employed to meet the needs of people with different sensory impairments.

The Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security was able to provide materials and helpful information. The Ministry is planning increased access to



alternative formats of communication. The Office for Disability Issues located within the Ministry was proactive and very responsive to this research project.

The Ministry for Children and Families gave several contacts and interviews for this study. The Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks also participated and cooperated in providing information.

As indicated above, the Ministry of Finance and Corporate Relations advised it would not be able to participate in this research project as it was in the middle of budget preparations.

a) Background

From the research and from interviews, it is clear that the provincial government has long been aware of challenges facing individuals with sensory impairments and the need to provide information in alternative formats. A strategy for coordinating disability issues development, including the provision of information in alternate formats, can be traced back over a number of years involving government and community action.

By way of brief summary, a Premier's Advisory Council (PAC) was established in 1989 to encourage and promote greater participation by people with disabilities in all aspects of the social, economic and cultural life in British Columbia. Its role included advising government about ways to facilitate this participation. By the early 1990s, PAC recommended that the government adopt an equal access policy wherein the proceedings of government meetings and access to government documents be in simple, accessible formats for people with sensory disabilities.

In the years following, the government put in place structures to address the concerns of people with disabilities, which have always included the issue of alternative communication formats.

- In 1993, PAC approached the government about enhancing their relationship in order to bring about a more direct influence upon the decisions affecting people with disabilities being made by government.
- In 1994, Premier Harcourt announced the government's Strategy for Coordinating Disabilities, which came about as a result of extensive



consultation with the communities of people with disabilities. This strategy had a mandate to:

- heighten awareness of disability issues in the province of British Columbia;
- ensure open communications between government, those with disabilities and related agencies; and
- facilitate ongoing input into public policy and program priorities of government.
- The government also accepted the recommendation of the PAC that there should be a cabinet minister responsible for disability issues. In June 1994, the Premier named the Minister of Skills, Training and Labour, the Honourable Dan Miller, as the new Minister Responsible for Disability Issues. "I know the result of all this will be a greater awareness and a higher profile for disability issues within government and for the public at large," Minister Miller said. He expressed his confidence in the Strategy as an effective way to make a real difference in the lives of people with disabilities in British Columbia.
- Subsequently, a Committee of Assistant Deputy Ministers on Disabilities Issues was established. It played a key role in developing cross-ministry budgets and the coordination of disability issues. It subsequently established a working group to develop a Disability Lens.
- The Disability Lens is a tool for identifying and clarifying issues affecting people with disabilities. It provides government policy and program developers and analysts with a framework for assessing and addressing the impacts of all initiatives (policies, programs or decisions) on people with disabilities. If properly applied, the Disability Lens would result in government programs and policies that respond to the communication needs of people with disabilities.
- An Office for Disability Issues (ODI) was also established and given a broad and important mandate to deal with disability issues.

Office for Disability Issues: The ODI is responsible for facilitating an enhanced relationship between the provincial government, other governments, people with disabilities, their families, allies and supporters, and organizations representing people with disabilities. The ODI seeks to install a direct connection to government for people with disabilities.



programs to organizations. The advocacy role of the ODI and its strategy is one which seeks to ensure that the interests of the disability community are voiced when policies, programs or legislation that will impact on the disability community or some part of the community are being prepared.

In addition, the ODI:

- reviews policy and legislation which may affect people with disabilities and recommends action across provincial government ministries;
- informs and educates public policy makers, facilitates public education on disability issues, attitudes and assumptions;
- reports on government policies, initiatives and progress in resolving disability inequity; and,
- works to address broad disability policy issues across the provincial government.

b) Policy Work Completed By ODI

In 1998, the ODI prepared two substantial policy documents on alternate communications formats which reflected most of the concerns raised in the community consultations undertaken as part of this research study.

In a document entitled "The Provision Of Alternative Communications For Persons With Sensory Impairments: Development Of A Provincial Policy And Procedures Manual - Final Report" the ODI made comprehensive recommendations on the issues of providing alternative communications. The document discussed the absence of a formal, written policy on the part of the provincial government to ensure that people with sensory impairments have access to government information and services, and to activities such as meetings, hearings and public events.

The ODI determined that if a request for alternative formats is made, the government does not have procedures in place to guide staff on how to provide information in an appropriate format. It confirmed the need for the provincial government to ensure equitable access to information intended for the general public by individuals with sensory impairments. The document noted that advocates in the disability field in British Columbia have lobbied for some time for the provincial government to adopt a policy on alternative communications.





Some of the highlights from *The Provision Of Alternative Communications For Persons With Sensory Impairments: Development of A Provincial Policy And Procedures Manual-Final Report* include:

- a clear explanation of the issues of providing alternative communications;
- definitions regarding alternative communications;
- discussion of the absence of a formal, written policy on the part of the provincial government to ensure that people with sensory impairments have access to government information and services, to activities such as meetings and hearings, or to public events and forums;
- determination that if a request for alternative formats is made, the government does not have procedures in place to guide staff on the provision of these formats;
- observations that there is a need for the provincial government to ensure equitable access to information intended for the general public by individuals who have effective communications needs;
- recognition that advocates in the disability field in British Columbia have lobbied for some time for the provincial government to adopt a policy on alternative communications;
- development of a draft provincial policy on the provision of alternative communications for people who have sensory impairments;
- preparation of a draft procedures manual to guide provincial staff on the provision of alternate formats and alternate communications strategies;
- preparation of options regarding proceeding from the draft policy state;
- a Draft Alternative Communications Policy; and,
- a set of Draft Guidelines for the Provision of Alternative Communications.

In a second document entitled "Policy On The Provision of Alternative Formats And Alternative Communication Support", the ODI prepared a comprehensive document pertaining to further policy development on the provision of alternate formats and alternative communication supports for people with sensory impairments. This paper includes concrete recommendations that the government should implement to meet the communication needs of people with disabilities.





Some of the recommendations from *Policy On The Provision of Alternative Formats And Alternative Communication Support* were requirements that:

- government documents be in formats that will include, but are not to be limited to: large print, Braille, audio cassette, computer diskette, descriptive narration, and computer access via electronic mail and accessible Internet sites;
- government publications state which documents are available in alternative formats and where they can be ordered;
- internet web sites maintained by the province will be fully accessible by people with disabilities and will include information on publications and documents available to the general public;
- government web sites will also be used to advertise events such as public hearings, forums and conferences;
- videos produced by, or for the province, will be closed captioned for people who are deaf or hard of hearing and will include descriptive narration for people who are blind or who have low or restricted vision;
- television broadcasts and advertising campaigns will be closed captioned and telephone contact numbers will be spoken out;
- events organized for attendance by members of the public, such as public hearings, forums and conferences, will include the provision of access to information for people with disabilities;
- printed materials will also be available on computer diskette at the event;
- as well, sign language interpreters and alternative formats, other than computer diskettes, will be provided at the event, if they have been requested in advance;
- documents in alternative formats will be provided within a reasonable time frame, and at a cost that will not exceed that charged to people without alternative format needs;
- alternative communication support will be provided upon request, and at a cost that will not exceed that charged to people without alternative communication support needs;



- government communicators will make every effort to present their messages in plain language to facilitate communication with the general public;
- whenever it can reasonably be anticipated that there will be a demand for a publication in an alternative format, or a production utilizing alternative communication support, this format is to be prepared in advance;
- the budget for a government communications product or activity will include the costs of providing alternative formats and alternative communication support - and the planning process and communications strategies for the project will include considerations for providing access to information for people with disabilities;
- where the provincial government undertakes joint sponsorship of communications materials or activities with another government or a non-government body, the provincial government will take responsibility for ensuring that access to information is provided for all its citizens;
- where a government ministry or crown corporation routinely communicates with people with alternative communication support needs, or with organizations which provide membership or services to people who have alternative format or alternative communication support needs, an internal mailing list will be maintained which indicates the appropriate formats and the appropriate communication supports to address those needs - correspondence or other communications sent to those individuals and organizations will automatically be sent out in the appropriate formats;
- a central mechanism for receiving complaints about the non-provision of alternative formats and alternative communication support will be developed by the provincial government;
- the provincial government should prepare and distribute a brochure on the provision of alternative formats and alternative communication support outlining the details of the policy, including the procedure for requesting the provision of alternative formats and alternative communication support, and the contact phone number for questions and/or complaints; and,
- an annual report be prepared on the use, impact, cost, and effectiveness of provincial government policy on the provision of alternative formats and alternative communication support, including complaints and their resolution.



c) Technology

Those consulted, as well as officials from the Office for Disability Issues, stressed the availability of information technology as a tool to help many individuals with sensory disabilities. Information technology supports have been identified within the provincial government since the early 1990s. The Information, Science and Technology Agency of the provincial government notes that "advances in information technology are dramatically changing the way people work, learn and communicate with each other."

In February 2000, the government announced InfoSmart 2000, its "...strategic plan to ensure that information technology is used to deliver more flexible access to government services, to better protect personal information, and to make the processes of government more efficient."

The strategic plan recognizes that:

"Citizens must have improved access to government services. They will be able to get information, change an address, make a payment, obtain a license or permit, apply for a service, or communicate with an elected official using the telephone and the Internet. These technologies are easy to use and remove time and distance barriers."

The strategic plan lays out a vision for a possible future for the effective use of innovative technology to expand the methods of service delivery, including public use of "...self-serve methods such as interactive voice response, e-mail, and fax back services to meet their specific requirements."

To ensure this strategic plan is implemented, "...the government has made a province-wide commitment to effective, ongoing partnerships between government, high technology businesses, related institutions, community organizations and the education systems."

Having said this, the InfoSmart 2000 Website is currently inaccessible to people with visual impairments.



*The government
should adopt the
Alberta legislation
regarding the
provision of
information in
alternate formats.
This legislation costs
only \$300,000 -
\$400,000 per year in
administration and
operational costs.
Two other provinces
have adopted similar
legislation.*

Service Provider

d) Summary of Ministry Consultations

Ministries were aware of the need to provide information in alternative formats although none of the specific individuals consulted had the experience of receiving requests for information in alternative formats. Ministries stated that, generally, they would try to reasonably accommodate a request for information in an alternate format where the target population warranted providing it.

Ministries were not proactive in providing information in alternate formats. It was demand driven; i.e., a request for information in an alternate format had to be received. An example cited was a book on birthing provided by the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security in Braille in response to requests received. Even then, information may not be provided in a timely manner. Information provided in Braille for the government's outreach program on the Nisga'a Treaty was cited as an example.

Ministries recognized that the provision of such information would serve the needs of individuals, advocates, community groups, service providers and front line government workers. However, communications branches of ministries have no budget for the provision of information in alternate formats. These branches are understaffed, with their budgets limited and diminishing.

The priority of communications branches is getting information out to the general public, usually in the form of news releases or announcements, often prepared and distributed on short notice and with quick turn around times. The view of ministries is that this limits what a ministry could do to reasonably accommodate a request for provision of information in an alternate format, especially on a short turn around.

All of the above represents a substantial barrier for ministries wishing to provide information in alternate formats.

Ministry Directors of Communication have no direct links with community or advocacy groups representing individuals with sensory impairments or invisible disabilities. As a result, there is no ongoing dialogue and exchange of information between them.

Ministries have no policies directing the provision of information in alternate formats. As well, there is no central government directive that ministries must meet to put information in alternate formats prior to its release or immediately thereafter.



The government does recognize that information must be provided in alternate linguistic formats, such as Mandarin, Cantonese and Punjabi. For example, Enquiry BC provides assistance in a number of languages in addition to English. In the case of the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, non-English language information could be provided where the Ministry is planning to undertake an activity, such as gypsy moth spraying, in geographic areas where there are high concentrations of ethnic minority populations whose primary language is not English. There is no similar level of recognition for the provision of information in alternative formats for individuals with sensory impairments.

While the Disability Lens is a useful tool, no information was provided which details how rigorously ministries apply the Lens. Certainly, the Disability Lens is not enshrined in legislation like the government's Regulatory Impact Statement, or "Business Lens", and, accordingly, must rate a lower operational priority.

In addition to the above:

- While there are levels of awareness regarding the need to provide information to individuals with sensory impairments, the issues and challenges of communicating to people with invisible disabilities does not prominently appear on the government's agenda.
- It is clear that government recognizes the importance of the issue of technology to communicate as is evidenced by the government's information technology strategy.
- No areas of the government that the researchers examined met the communication needs of people with sensory impairments. Thus, no model could be identified as a model for other ministries.





3. Inventory of Ministry Communications

a) General Observations

The researchers attempted to gather an inventory list of all communications in all available formats. Most ministries were unable to respond with a full listing and were unaware of what was available in alternative formats. There is no government policy on providing printed information in a standardized font such as Arial as is recommended by advocates for the visually impaired.

All ministries had web pages which contained an inventory of many of its publications, but it was not clear if any of the information was available in alternative formats. Two ministries showed "text only" web links at the beginning of the home page. "Text only" web links are important to people who are visually impaired whose computer software decodes text information, but cannot decode PDF, graphics, and text mixed with images.

Some of the links from the "text only" were not accessible and many of the linkages were not available.

There was no information available on videos save for the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, which is cutting back on their use as a communications tool due to their cost. As well, there was no inventory on television advertising.

Information compiled in the following tables was obtained from the ministries directly or from their web sites. Materials provided by the government directly or from their web sites gave no indication if they were available in video, large print, or diskette, were closed-captioned, or had "text only" links or a standard identification point to determine alternative formatting.

Table 1 provides a list of publications and information available. It is apparent from it that a great deal of information is available to the general public with little of it available in alternative formats. The Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security (MSDES) had the bulk of items in alternate formats and were quickly able to identify what those items were and where to access them.



Ministry Internet web sites were the most prolific source of information but links for "text only" are not at the top in standardized locations and graphics were often included within pages. Stakeholders with vision impairments indicate that graphics make it difficult for them to access information. MSDES had a machine readable web site for publications, meetings and events but it needs to be updated in order to be fully accessible by the visually impaired.

On ministry web sites, there is a large amount of information available on programs and services, brochures for programs and how to access them, critical community information, budget and planning documentation, news, ministry contacts, other links regarding specific issues, and links to communicate with government. This information is for the general public and is not in alternative formats.

While the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks does have a "text only" option to its web site, it goes through many pages which never link up to the common information the rest of the public gets.

In terms of programs and services, the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security has an Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities Branch. 50% of Vocational Rehabilitation Services Offices have TTY. Branch consultants are accessible by e-mail and phone. The Branch funds an adaptive technology equipment loan bank for students in post-secondary training and for employed participants. Specialized contractors (such as the Western Institute for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing) broaden access by delivering accessible service to target groups.

The Office for Disability Issues, which is part of the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security, also provides sensitivity workshops for government staff.



b) Ministry of Finance and Corporate Relations

The Ministry has 57 publications available from Queen's Printer and 49 Ministry publications. There is no information indicating that any Ministry publications are available in alternate formats.

The Ministry web site has information on the Minister, news releases by date and year, and a search option to other information. Again, there is no information indicating that any of it is available in alternate formats.

The Ministry web site also lists a number of programs and services.

c) Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks

No Ministry publications are available in alternate formats

The Ministry web site has information on the Minister, news releases by date and year, a search option to other information, links to other contacts and points of interest and a list of publications and live links. Again, there is no information indicating that any of it is available in alternate formats

The Ministry has much information to share but once the "text only" link is activated, the links to the bulk of the information are lost.

d) Ministry for Children and Families

The Ministry has 64 publications available from Queen's Printer and more Ministry publications are available on the web site. There is no information indicating that any Ministry publications are available in alternate formats.

The Ministry web site has information on the Minister, news releases by date and year, and a search option to other information. Again, there is no information indicating that any of it is available in alternate formats.



e) Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security

The Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security is most attuned to this issue and would, if permitted, take a leadership role in government in setting new standards of excellence in providing information in alternate formats. This ministry would like to take a leadership role in responding to issues that impact people with sensory impairments. The Ministry has 26 publications available from Queen's Printer and more Ministry publications available on the web site.

The Ministry web site has information on the Minister, news releases by date and year, and a search option to other information.

If they get turned down, they just start to waste away, or go to live with someone else who really doesn't want them there or maybe can't afford to have them there.

Family Advocate

The Ministry has:

- Brochure - Disability Benefits - available in Braille, diskette and audiotape
- Staff newsletter - Connections - machine readable
- Business cards - Deputy Minister and various staff - available in Braille

The Office for Disabilities Issues within the Ministry has:

- Website - machine readable
- Newsletter - The Strategy - available on audio tape and diskette
- Audio tape - Accessible BC
- Audio tape - Guide Animal Act
- Audio tape - Premier's Advisory Committee on the Strategy for Co-ordinating Disability Issues
- Audio tape/Braille - Various Strategy-related materials
- Audio tape - Student Financial Assistance information
- Switchboard - TTY equipped
- Public meetings - organized by ODI are accessible



Table 1 - Publications and Information

List of Items Available	MELP	MSDES	Finance	MCF	In Alternate Format
Queen's Printer Publications	165	26	57	64	no
News Releases	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Publications	22	172	49	61	4 (MSDES)
Audio Tape	0	6	0	5	11 (MSDES & MCF)
Public Meetings	no	yes	no	no	yes (MSDES)
Annual Reports Corporate Information	yes	no	yes	yes	no
Television	unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown	unknown
Telephone Services	no	yes TTY	no	yes TTY	

- The inventory of publications was compiled from ministry web pages and from information supplied by ministries. All publications found were for viewing and use by the general public. All publications were available in print or through web pages with few exceptions.
- Ministries were uncertain how or if publications could be presented in an alternative format. The Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security had the bulk of the items available in alternative formats and were able to quickly identify what those items were.
- Most ministries were unable to supply a comprehensive list of material and publications. Therefore, information on public meetings, further categories of brochures and publications and instruction papers is not available.
- No information was provided on television ads and policies regarding closed-captioning and sign language.
- MSDES has a machine readable web site for publications, meetings and events.
- Enquiry BC provides a TTY line for hearing impaired.



4. Conclusions and Recommendations



Stakeholders are frustrated by the failure of the government to act. They see no good reason for a lack of action. They see the failure to act as discriminatory and harsh.

Stakeholders were passionate about the need for immediate action, and time and time again expressed a willingness to form partnerships with the government to achieve results.

It is clear that extensive policy development around the provision of alternative communication formats for people with sensory impairments has been prepared by the Office for Disability Issues (ODI), the government's policy-making body charged with responsibility for the issue. Insofar as there has been policy development, it mirrors what was stated by stakeholders; namely, that the government is fully aware of the nature and extent of the issues.

The work of the ODI also confirms another major point raised by stakeholders — further study of the issues is not required. All the information has been collected, sifted through, considered, and analyzed. It awaits action by the government. The work of the ODI could serve as a government-wide standard for the provision of information in alternative formats. However, additional policy work pertaining to people with invisible disabilities is required.

Therefore, it is recommended that:

1. The government take immediate steps to adopt and implement the Policy on the Provision of Alternate Formats and Alternative Communications Support prepared by the Office for Disability Issues.
2. Each ministry and Crown Corporation be required to report yearly on progress made to implement this policy.
3. A senior level committee of government representatives and community groups and advocates be established to meet quarterly to review progress on implementing this policy. An additional responsibility of this committee will be to make recommendations to the government on improvements to the policy.



4. In consultation with community groups and advocates, the government undertake the development, adoption, and implementation of provincial policy pertaining to people with invisible disabilities. This should include the use of clear language, confidentiality and privacy issues, and the role and mandate of advocates.
5. The BC Human Rights Commission undertake further research on challenges facing people with invisible disabilities in communicating with the government.
6. In consultation with community groups and advocates, the government undertake the development, adoption, and implementation of provincial policy pertaining to the use of "intervenors" for people who are deaf, blind, or deaf-blind.
7. The provincial government establish, as a performance measure for Deputy Ministers, the successful implementation of the government's policy on alternative communications.
8. Deputy Ministers, directors of communication for ministries and Crown corporations, and front line ministry staff serving the public undertake awareness and sensitivity training on disability issues, and that such a training program be adequately resourced.
9. Such training be developed in partnership between community groups, advocates and the provincial government.
10. The provincial government develop a policy on the provision of surplus computers to assist people with sensory impairments. In addition, the government should seek partnerships with the private sector to expand such a program.
11. All government publications available in an alternate format be clearly tagged with a distinct logo. This would include distinct colour and texture and a consistent location on the publication.
12. The government ensure there is closed captioning on all government television advertisements and, where 1-800 numbers are used, they be read aloud.
13. The government establish a central body, like Enquiry BC, as a one-stop body of knowledge with expertise on issues that affect people with disabilities. The role, mandate, and function of this body should be determined in consultation with community groups and advocates. This



body would have a 1-800 number and would serve the needs of people in the community as well as be a resource for front line and other government staff.

14. This central body could also provide referrals to community groups and advocates where their consent and permission is obtained.
15. The government ensure that the InfoSmart 2000 Website is made accessible to people with visual impairments. All government websites should adopt "text only" standards so that the visually impaired can access the same documents as the general public.





Appendix



Consultation List³

1. Advocates for the Sight Impaired Consumers
2. BC Aboriginal Network on Disability Society
3. BC Alzheimer's Society
4. BC Association for Community Living
5. BC Coalition of People With Disabilities
6. BC Educational Society of Disabled Students
7. BC Self Advocacy Foundation
8. Canadian Cancer Society
9. Canadian Council of the Blind
10. Canadian Deaf Blind and Rubella Association
11. Canadian Diabetes Association
12. Canadian Hard of Hearing Society
13. Canadian Mental Health Association Provincial Chapter
14. Canadian Mental Health Regional Chapter
15. Canadian National Institute of the Blind BC Yukon Division
16. Community Legal Assistance Society
17. Crane Resource Centre Library
18. Deaf Children's Society of BC
19. Garth Homer Society
20. Healing Our Spirit BC First Nations AIDS Society
21. Henry Vlug, Barrister and Solicitor
22. Literacy BC
23. Ministry for Children and Families
24. Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks
25. Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security
26. North Shore Disability Resource Centre
27. Office For Disability Issues
28. People With Mental Handicaps
29. Public Service Employee Relations Commission
30. Resource Centre for Independent Living
31. Western Institute for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

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It's Time
to Act

³ Individuals who were consulted are not listed.